

# ***Korean War Anthology***

## **Truman and MacArthur: The Winding Road to Dismissal**

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Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
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1. REPORT DATE <b>2006</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Truman and MacArthur: The Winding Road to Dismissal</b>			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Army Command and General Staff College, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 66027</b>			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>22</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

Cover Photo: *Fond Encounter. The president and General Douglas MacArthur at Wake Island, 15 October 1950.* (U.S. Department of State, courtesy of the Harry S. Truman Library)

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CSI Press 03-03



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I have been with the president on occasions when he had what appeared to me to be a perfectly normal and amiable conversation with a caller. After the caller left, he would say to me ‘I certainly set him straight’ or ‘I let him have it.’ The president’s remarks seemed to me to have no conceivable relation to the conversation I had just heard. He may have been commenting on what he wished he had said.

As always he was very, very gentle—too gentle.

Admiral Robert Dennison,  
White House assistant to President Truman, 1948-1953<sup>1</sup>

Like most people, Harry Truman was subject to conflicting interests and impulses. He believed in strong executive leadership under the aegis of combative presidents, such as his life-long hero, Andrew Jackson. (He once told Dean Acheson, his secretary of state, he liked “being a nose buster and an ass kicker much better” than a statesman.) On the other hand, Truman was too nice to be the man he dreamed of being, except in those rare moments when his temper took total control. Usually, he avoided personal confrontation, being a considerate, rather modest individual. Personality aside, Truman served his Washington apprenticeship in the inner circle of Capitol Hill, where the upper house functions by compromise and conciliation. Whatever his ideals of heroic manliness, Truman enjoyed his reputation as “the nicest man in the Senate,” the place he would spend “the happiest time of my life.”<sup>2</sup>

An avid reader raised on stories of military heroes, Truman particularly liked the biographical portraits of Hannibal, Gustavus Adolphus, Robert E. Lee, and “Stonewall” Jackson compiled in a Victorian anthology titled *Great Men and Famous Women*. His understanding of their conditions and careers would affect decisions he made throughout his life, whether running for the Senate, dealing with Douglas MacArthur, or courting Bess Wallace, the childhood sweetheart he would later marry. Truman tried to enter West Point, partly because Bess’s family was far more prominent than his own, as he later jotted down in a diary: “I studied the career of great men to be worthy of her. I found that most of them came from the Army.” His plans failed to make provision for the fact that he could not read the eye chart at the physical examination without the thick glasses he had to remove. His disappointment did not prevent the formation of the opinion revealed



on 14 May 1934, the day Truman made what he then called “the most momentous announcement of my life,” that of leaving country government to run for the U.S. Senate. He jotted down in his diary: “Of all the military heroes Hannibal and Lee were to my mind the best because while they won every battle they lost the war, due to crazy politicians in both instances, but they were still the great Captains of History.”<sup>3</sup>

The fear that he might go down in history as “one of those crazy politicians” responsible for losing a war would affect how Truman dealt with MacArthur whom he certainly disliked from afar until charmed up close the first (and last) time they met, at Wake Island in mid-October 1950. Truman, as a Jacksonian Democrat and former National Guardsman embittered by some handling from an insulting West Point graduate in World War I, had some choice words about the general’s style in mid-1945: “Mr. Prima Donna, Brass Hat Five Star MacArthur.” These heated words notwithstanding, the administration still gave MacArthur the deference traditionally granted to a man considered a military genius. “He was a great American,” confided Averell Harriman, Truman’s special White House assistant for national security and unofficial ambassador to MacArthur. “Very few others in either the Army or the Navy possessed his sense of strategy and tactics or his capacity for leadership,” said Paul Nitze, head of the State Department’s Policy Planning staff, “he had done tremendous things in World War II.” Truman himself would later write that he and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) “leaned over backward in our respect for the man’s military reputation,” simply “one of the outstanding military figures of our time.”<sup>4</sup>

The Truman-MacArthur command interaction went through three stages in the Korean War. Stage 1, from the onset of the conflict in late June 1950 to the Inchon operation in late September, was one of implicit bargaining and compromise. Stage 2, from late September to China’s full-scale intervention in late November, was one of de facto abdication by the president. The military commander, Commander in Chief Far East (CINCFE), made policy as recalled Richard Neustadt, then a member of the White House staff: Truman “passively await[ed] the outcome of MacArthur’s plans for victory.” In Stage 3, after China pushed the UN forces back from the Yalu River, Truman handled MacArthur as best he could by ignoring the CINCFE’s outbursts against his policy war and shifting operational authority for the war to the commander of the Eighth Army and the JCS. The general might snipe and complain to the press, even sabotage potential peace negotiations in late March 1951, without provoking the president toward the confrontation he long tired to avoid. In early April, MacArthur, very frustrated with his status and the stalemate in the war, wrote an embittered letter to Congressman Joe Martin, the leader of the Republican opposition in the House, that seemed to brand the general as a partisan politician at least in Truman’s eyes.

One could argue that MacArthur had thereby done what only he could do, ensure his dismissal from command.<sup>5</sup>

Stage 1 was set by disputes over U.S. policy toward Formosa (now commonly called Taiwan) on the eve of the Korean War—Stage 0.5, so to speak. In January 1950, the administration announced the end of military support for the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek, then holding his last redoubt on the island before what seemed his final defeat in the Chinese civil war. Truman hoped that his stance for nonintervention would foment latent hostility by Mao Zedong for Russia, assumed to be near the surface of a man who might break away from Kremlin dictates if Washington encouraged him to believe that it was not hostile to his regime. MacArthur had different concerns, whether speaking to the National Command Authorities and the JCS or to the foreign affairs columnist for *The New York Times*: “Formosa in the hands of the Communists can be compared to an unsinkable aircraft carrier and submarine tender located to accomplish Soviet offensive strategy.” He also had an agenda not discussed so frankly, outside of certain Chinese anti-Communists, such as Sun Li-jen, the most competent and incorruptible general the Nationalists had. He wrote MacArthur in mid-1949, after a private meeting they had in Tokyo headquarters: “If we can hold together [a] sufficient fighting force at a suitable place,” such as Formosa, “it would be possible to recover our lost ground [as in mainland China] by a series of well-guided counterattacks.”<sup>6</sup>

Washington modified its policy toward Formosa after North Korea invaded the South in late June 1950. It was part of a belabored attempt by the administration to build a broad domestic and international coalition including the Robert Taft wing Republicans, who loved Chiang on one hand, and the European socialists in NATO and the UN, who despised Chiang, on the other. The result was a policy of utter confusion in which America would defend Formosa, but not the governing regime, and told Chiang he could not launch preemptive strikes on Communist forces gathering along the coast to invade the island, presumably before September. In late July-early August 1950, when the North Koreans had backed UN forces into the Pusan perimeter, MacArthur went to Formosa for a personal inspection, wherein he called Chiang “my old comrade in arms” and said his “indomitable determination to resist Communist domination arouses my sincere admiration. His determination parallels the common interests and purpose of Americans that all people in the Pacific area shall be free.”<sup>7</sup>

Truman hit the ceiling. He had authorized no such endorsement, not even the trip. (MacArthur had notified the Pentagon of his intention, but it had informed neither the White House nor the State Department.) Harriman, who had known MacArthur as a neighbor when the general was commandant at West Point, volunteered to go to Tokyo to confer with the general, wherein he got the following

guidance from the president: Tell him to “leave Chiang Kai-shek alone. I do not want to have him get me into a war with Mainland China.” In return, “find out what he wants, and if it’s at all possible to do it, I will give it to him,” that is as long as the CINCFE waged war exclusively against North Korea. Whereupon MacArthur, after telling Harriman the Communists would not try to conduct the invasion “at the present time,” described his plan, germinating in his mind for years, to conduct a grand double envelopment, to be executed in this instance at Inchon.<sup>8</sup>

Harriman returned to Washington from Tokyo on 9 August and immediately went to the White House, where he told Truman, in so many words, that MacArthur agreed to his half of the bargain: “MacArthur answered that he would, as a soldier, obey any orders that he received from the president.” He also told Truman about Inchon, which is what MacArthur wanted in return. Truman told Harriman to “go and see Louis Johnson and General Omar Bradley [the secretary of defense and the chairman JCS]. I want them to act on it rapidly,” meaning don’t study it to death. The president’s special assistant for national security stopped at home to shower and eat breakfast before arriving at the Pentagon two hours later. By then, Truman had already contacted Bradley once and Johnson twice, leading them to question: “Averell, what have you been doing to the president?” When Harriman replied, “I was there [in Tokyo] entirely for political reasons,” Johnson responded, “Well, the president has told me he wants this plan of MacArthur’s supported.”<sup>9</sup>

Inchon was the personification of Stage 1; Wake Island of Stage 2, created by the aura surrounding MacArthur when his personal plan seemed to have snatched victory from defeat, or at least a stalemate. There are alternative interpretations based on the data in the Army’s official history written by Roy Appleman: that the decisive operation of the war against North Korea was the defense on the Pusan perimeter, where UN forces under Lieutenant General Walton Walker were doing more damage than anybody knew, particularly MacArthur’s headquarters underestimating the casualties inflicted on the enemy by over 50 percent. MacArthur, when reviewing the manuscript in 1957, said, “These conclusions are completely unwarranted and based upon figures concocted by the author, with little substantiation.” More important is what the Truman administration believed. Harriman, who brokered the Inchon deal, would call the landing “one of the most brilliant military achievements in our military history.” Truman, quite naturally would compliment himself for recognizing “a bold plan worthy of a master strategist.” Acheson would say Inchon “succeeded brilliantly.” He also admitted to Harriman in the fall of 1950, “there’s no stopping MacArthur now.” That is by the Truman administration relinquishing ultimate authority to the theater commander, at least until something went drastically wrong.<sup>10</sup>

The primary purpose of the Wake Island conference was precisely what MacArthur thought, a chance for the president to pose before photographers with

the hero of the hour, three weeks before the November congressional election that Truman passionately wanted his party to win. This was certainly not the most auspicious a time to cross-examine the general, whose military opinion he was not apt to challenge, partisan politics notwithstanding. A field grade officer, new to the G2 section of MacArthur's headquarters, would say that many of his "staff and commanders regarded him as God, they really thought he could do no wrong." That October, much the same thing could be said about the president of the United States. Truman, always wanting to avert war with either Russia or China, should have relied on the CIA and State Department political intelligence departments for assessments about decisionmaking by Communist politburos. Instead, he had no qualms about asking MacArthur "what are the chances for Chinese or Soviet interference?" Nor did he hesitate about accepting the CINCFE's immediate response, "very little."<sup>11</sup>

Dean Rusk, the assistant secretary of state for Far East affairs, tried to point out that Chinese intervention "might not be impossible," hardly strong words. He had been a staff officer in the China-India-Burma theater in World War II but could not force an airing of fallback, contingency plans. Truman passed him a message: "I want to get out of here before I get into trouble." No wonder MacArthur was "effervescent" on the plane ride back to Tokyo that afternoon. "He was at his sparkling best," a fellow passenger would recall. Unfortunately, the euphoria virtually assured trouble on the horizon. Truman's deference to the theater commander, so reported in Beijing, confirmed the proposition of Communist hard-liners that the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) had no choice but to fight, if only for survival, because the MacArthur clique, allied with Chiang, embodied American Far East policy.<sup>12</sup>

President Truman's response to the Chinese attack of 25 November, the first day of Stage 3, was one of outrage, more at MacArthur than at Mao or Joseph Stalin. Forty-five days after Wake Island, he wrote his first memorandum for record about his meeting with the general, no longer feeling it was productive to avoid public conflict with the CINCFE. Truman, a former haberdasher said to have looked "immaculate" even in a trench during World War I, recorded that "General MacArthur was at the airport with his shirt unbuttoned, wearing a greasy ham and eggs cap that evidently had been in use for 20 years." His wardrobe was bad; his assessment of the strategic situation in the Far East was worse. "He said the Chinese Commies would not attack, that we had won the war, and that we could send a division to Europe from Korea in January 1951."<sup>13</sup>

Truman would be bitter at MacArthur the rest of his life. "I considered him a great strategist," Truman said in 1959, "until he made the march into North Korea without the knowledge that he should have had of the Chinese coming in. That's what caused most of his trouble." The general, from the president's point of view, either broke the agreement they made back in August not to bring Beijing into the

war or he did not really know what China would do. The latter would mean that the field commander was no smarter than the leading figures in Washington. China's intervention "was really a great shocker," in the words of the secretary of the Army, "Nobody had expected this at all."<sup>14</sup>

Truman, consciously or not, would use MacArthur as a scapegoat for the failure shared by his administration. Doing so, he moved a long way from his old inclination to find fault with "the crazy politicians" rather than blame failure on the great generals, such as Hannibal or Lee. A president so clearly disillusioned at his field commander must have had strong illusions about that man's special prowess, not to be seriously questioned until events shattered the mystic. Truman's memoirs, written in retirement, would point to instances where he thought about relieving MacArthur "then and there." He did not do it in November-December 1950 for more substantial reasons than his explanation: "I had no desire to hurt General MacArthur personally;" that is kick a man already down.<sup>15</sup>

Good manners aside, there were good reasons per national security why "we could not cause the commanding general in the field to lose face before the enemy," as Truman told the National Security Council (NSC) on 28 November, mainly encouraging the Communists to exploit their advantage by pouring reinforcements into the battle. Hence Truman did his best to maintain his pretense of confidence even to John Hersey, a prominent writer given exclusive access to the White House in December: "People who don't know military affairs expect everything to go well all the time. . . .The greatest of generals have had to take reverses . . . [even] Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. . . . I'm not upset, like most people, about these reverses MacArthur is taking." Better Oval Office actors, such as Franklin Roosevelt or Ronald Reagan, could have pulled this off, not so Truman. He would tell his staff, in the presence of Hersey: "We've got a terrific situation on our hands . . . [MacArthur] says he's stymied." The President of the United States summed it up to the secretary of state on the 14th: "Dean, what a hell of a two weeks I've had."<sup>16</sup>

MacArthur, unlike his government, was never troubled by doubt or hesitation about what to do with Chinese bases beyond the Yalu River. On 1 December 1950, a weekly magazine asked him if restrictions against attacks on these targets were "a handicap to effective military operations?" He replied "an enormous handicap, without precedent in military history" and then sent the transcript of the interview to the United Press for instant distribution. One understands his sense of frustration. Contingency plans Washington made in July 1950 that expressly assumed intervention by Beijing would elicit "air and sea attacks on targets in Communist China directly related to the enemy effort in Korea." However, when the NSC met in the White House on 2 December, the day after publication of MacArthur's statement in the national press, it focused on the general's comments, not just the PRC. Acheson insisted that "it was essential to get some kind

of censorship in the Far Eastern Command immediately.” Truman, torn again, tried to take control but remain conciliatory, that is reconcile his belief that a president must command, per his hero Andrew Jackson, with his personal and political desire to avoid conflict with MacArthur.<sup>17</sup>

The result of this ambivalence was a directive written by George Elsey, White House counsel, commonly known as “the gag order,” a misleading title too strong for its actual content. Sent on 6 December “in the light of the present critical international situation,” its stated justification suggested it was a temporary measure lasting no longer than the present emergency. Clear all “public” statements on foreign policy with the State Department—military policy with the Department of Defense. Submit them in advance to the “White House for information”; notice the absence of the word “approval.” The Pentagon, two days later, sent a clarifying message that contained more escape clauses and equivocations: “Intent of instructions not to prohibit speeches by military on suitable occasions. Necessity of imparting sound and authoritative information to the public is as important as it always has been. . . . Department of Army is prepared to assist with advice and clearances when you are in doubt”—all this to a man who rarely gave much indication that he entertained much doubt at all.<sup>18</sup>

The so-called gag order went out to all major military commands, as well as all members of the cabinet and the directors of the federal agencies for selective service, price stabilization, economic cooperation, central intelligence, and national resources—hardly what one would call a roundup of the usual suspects possibly guilty of insubordination. The government obviously put its directive “into general terms in order to avoid making it specifically personal to MacArthur,” as George Marshall later testified to the senate hearing on the CINCFE’s dismissal. MacArthur, back in December 1950, was certainly not mollified by the pretense that he was only part of a crowd. He wrote a confidant on the 20th: “this has been by far the most open drive from Washington against me with but little effort to conceal the individuals responsible.” However, at least for the time being, he would not defy the executive branch because he felt it must be behind the general criticism leveled on his command during its retreat from North Korea, hence disclosing it was searching for an excuse to dismiss him into retirement. He was now on guard against making public statements in an open forum, “I have [since 6 December] made no effort to clarify any further questions raised concerning the Korean campaign.”<sup>19</sup>

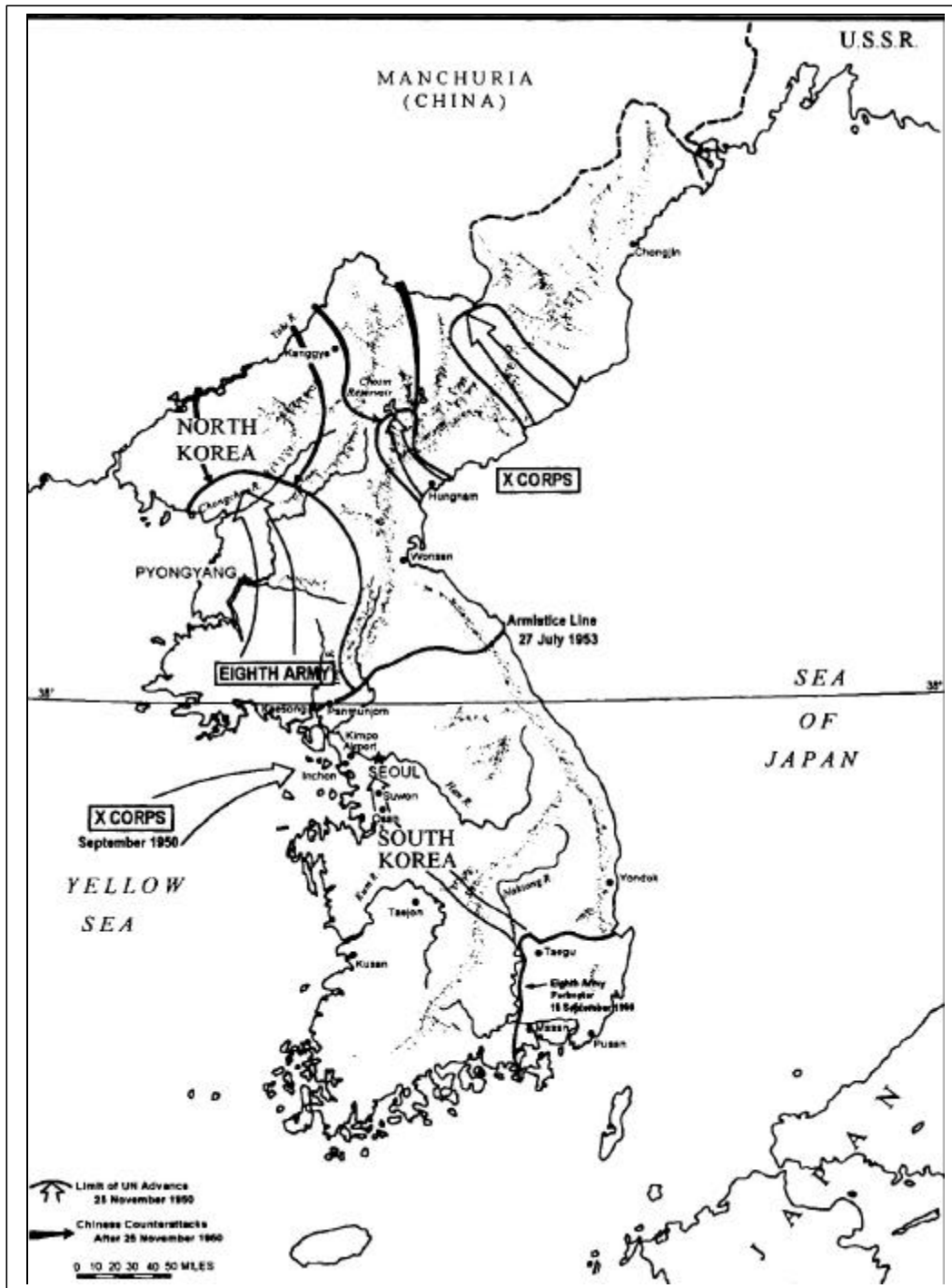
Truman must have sighed a breath of relief for peace on the MacArthur front, at least for the time being. However, once UN forces pulled themselves together under Matthew Ridgway, held off the enemy after a long retreat south, and began to head back to the 38th Parallel, MacArthur returned to open words of warning on 13 and 20 February: “We must not fall into the error of evaluating such tactical successes as decisively leading to the enemy’s defeat.” One presumes the general

went public because Washington had not paid particular heed to his secret message sent on 11 February: “Unless authority is given to strike bases in Manchuria, our ground forces as presently constituted cannot with safety attempt major operations in North Korea.” With Manchuria left intact, the enemy “retains the potential to employ a force which will enable him to resume the offensive and force [another] retrograde movement upon us.”<sup>20</sup>

Six weeks later, by late March, the front lines were at or near the prewar boundary between North and South Korea. The Truman administration felt this presented an ideal opportunity for a peace settlement since each side could retain politically its territorial integrity, having held it on the battlefield and hardened its lines. For MacArthur, this simply meant protraction as defined when arguing on behalf of Inchon, the only alternative to a “war of indefinite duration, of gradual attrition, and of doubtful results.” In 1951, he predicted the same outcome if Washington rejected his plans to take the war beyond the peninsula. “Red Chinese aggression in Asia could not be stopped by killing Chinese, no matter how many in Korea, so long as her power to make war remained inviolate,” he told his staff in March. In impromptu press conferences, he began to call Ridgway’s step-by-step movement an “accordion war,” a term elaborated in his remarks about a “heavy cost in Allied blood” and “the unprecedented military advantage of sanctuary protection” enjoyed by the Communist side. In ostensible defiance of directions to clear policy statements with Washington, he also made reference to the “unification of Korea” while confiding in a stage whisper: “This old soldier cannot obtain approval on any statement more significant than a [company status] morning report.”<sup>21</sup>

The CINCFE had not run out of ideas. Truman’s liaison officer at Tokyo headquarters wrote the White House on 28 February, that “General MacArthur is on the verge of pulling twin white rabbits out of a black silk hat,” a reference to the CINCFE’s new plan—or should one say his old plan—for a spectacular military operation. He had thought, back in July 1950, of conducting amphibious landings behind enemy positions on both sides of the peninsula, a concept then scratched for lack of men and equipment. The general now dusted off the plan for this double envelopment, to be supplemented with airborne landings and *Kuomingtang* (Taiwan’s political party) troops. Courtney Whitney, MacArthur’s closest confidant, would later call it “Inchon all over again, except on a far larger scale.” On 3 April, the theater commander’s last trip to Korea, he said “our strategy [meaning my strategy] remains unchanged. . . . It is based on maneuver and not positional warfare.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1958, MacArthur told a confidant, in so many words, that the enemy was sitting there “naked, without ammunition, without sufficient anything. . . . He could have walked around ’em and trapped the whole damn Chinese army. As far



Map of Korea



as he was concerned the whole thing would be finished.” MacArthur said he could not understand why Washington had turned him down flat. At other times, he had an all-purpose explanation. While still on active duty, he felt subjected to a “carefully outlined campaign of propaganda” to discredit his generalship vis-à-vis the commander of the Eighth Army. It would climax with the proposition from columnists well connected to the administration that “Ridgway, rather than MacArthur, has actually been in full command of the United Nations forces in Korea.” This claim, although overstated, reflected an essential fact. From Washington’s perspective, to quote Bradley’s posthumously published memoir: “There was a feeling that MacArthur had been ‘kicked upstairs’ to chairman of the board and was, insofar as military operations were concerned, mainly a prima donna figure-head who had to be tolerated.”<sup>23</sup>

Truman kept his distance through two months of violation of the intent, if not the letter, of the so-called gag order, even after MacArthur preempted a major presidential message with a public communiqué of his own on 24 March. Truman had planned to warn the enemy that “a prompt settlement of the Korean problem would greatly reduce international tension in the Far East and would open the way for the consideration of other problems in the area,” diplomatic code for Formosa. However, “until satisfactory arrangements for ending the fighting have been reached, United Nations military action must be continued,” no hint of escalation, that is taking the war to China. MacArthur waved a much larger stick. “There should be no insuperable difficulty in arranging decisions on the Korean problem if the issues are resolved on their own merits, without being burdened by extraneous matters such as Formosa or China’s seat in the United Nations.” If the enemy still persisted, it could well expect his UN command “to depart from its tolerant effort to contain the war to the area of Korea, through an expansion of our military operations to its coastal areas and interior bases [that] would doom Red China to the risk of imminent military collapse.”<sup>24</sup>

The status of Formosa, long a flash point of contention between Truman and MacArthur, had reared its head again. As for Beijing, it simply would not negotiate in response to the general’s ultimatum. Mao was hurting, but not so desperate as to swallow the humiliation served up by MacArthur, who would have him crawl to an armistice for wanton fear of imminent destruction. Truman, in these circumstances, could only remove his own proposal before release and reply “no comment” to questions about MacArthur’s proclamation. If not, he would have drawn even more international attention to the disarray in America’s chain of command, a topic of serious discussion among NATO allies who said MacArthur personified what was variously called Caesarism or Bonapartism, the threat of military men to republican government. The president in April would say that the presidency was at stake. In late March, the government’s immediate response was remarkably circumspect. State Department officials told reporters, “so far as they



*Political Cartoon*

could determine MacArthur's statement was not cleared in Washington before he issued it in Tokyo." Truman simply directed the Pentagon to tell the CINCFE to "direct that your attention be called to the order as transmitted 6 December 1950"; that is make no announcements on policy without government concurrence. "P.S.: Honest this time," was the essence of the message, according to a Herblock political cartoon in the *Washington Post*.<sup>25</sup>

Within a month, Truman would begin spinning a myth that MacArthur's ultimatum caused his relief from command. On 28 April, he would tell Elsey, draftsman of the gag order, that the general's action "was inexcusable," forgetting that he had excused it at the time. In 1952, Truman's staff would tell the National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, per its entry on the president, that the action to relieve MacArthur "was taken following an unauthorized ultimatum containing unauthorized terms." (Did the word "following" mean the exact same thing as the phrase "caused by"?) In 1955, Bradley told two research assistants working on Truman's memoirs that the message to China "was the straw that broke the camel's back . . . that was when the president finally gave up." In the memoir, published the following year, Truman stated without equivocation that

MacArthur's message to the enemy on 24 March sealed his fate: "I could no longer tolerate his insubordination." He said no such thing in his diary until 6 April.<sup>26</sup>

By drawing attention to MacArthur's diktat to China, Truman diverted attention from something he would later call "regrettable and shameful"; that is the making the Korean War "a football in a partisan political campaign." Something like that happened on 5 April, when Roger Tubby, the president's deputy press secretary, rushed into the oval office with a ticker tape copy of Martin's latest political attack. The Republican minority leader in the House of Representatives just said that "our great ally, the established government of the Republic of China," should be released to establish "a second front on China's mainland" with the force Truman held back on the island of Formosa. Taiwan, always near the surface of the conflict between the president and MacArthur, thereby reared its head again.<sup>27</sup>

Martin was strongly of the opinion that Chiang's army of some 800,000 was the key to victory. "It is high time," he went on, "that the administration and the Pentagon came clean with the Congress and with the American people . . . If we are not in Korea to win, then the Truman administration should be indicted for the murder of thousands of American boys." He followed this assertion with a declaration that "the only way to achieve the leadership we so desperately need is by a landslide Republican victory next year." Embedded in the speech was a letter of endorsement MacArthur wrote back on 20 March about Martin's way to wage the war. What he proposed, according to the general, was "in conflict with neither logic nor [the] tradition" of "meeting force with maximum counterforce, as we have never failed to do so in the past," at least until now. MacArthur closed his letter with one of his favorite phrases: "As you point out, we must win. There is no substitute for victory." Truman, when not claiming this was small potatoes in relationship to the ultimatum to China, said those particular words were the real "clincher."<sup>28</sup>

Truman, a military history buff, had been engrossed in reading Bradley's recently released memoir of World War II serialized in *Life Magazine* when Tubby busted in on 5 April. Not wanting to be disturbed, he quickly passed over the wire service press release Tubby handed him and calmly said, "the newspaper boys are putting [MacArthur] up to this." There was nothing particularly new about remarks from MacArthur, although the gag order of December expressly told him "to refrain from direct communications on military or foreign policy with newspapers, magazines, or other publicity media in the United States." The general had routinely ignored that directive, if only to defend his reputation damaged by defeat, even when the blame then fell on his boss, the President of the United States, who had not penalized his comments, as of yet. Tubby, however, persisted, although well aware that his junior position scarcely warranted involvement in high



*Protest of General MacArthur's Dismissal*  
(AP photo, Youngstown Ohio, 13 Apr 51)

matters of state. He told the president: “this man is not only insubordinate, he’s insolent and he ought to be fired.” Truman only then read the press copy carefully, apparently finding some disturbing factor heretofore overlooked. When finished, he looked up and said, “By God, Roger, I think you are right.”<sup>29</sup>

What was new, different, and decisive? Heretofore, partisan Republicans endorsed MacArthur’s comments on Formosa, Korea, China, and other sundry matters. He had not endorsed them directly on what seemed a partisan basis. Once he did, he was in Truman’s mind a political, not a military, figure as indicated in Truman’s diary entries on 5 and 6 April: “The situation with regard to the Far Eastern general has become a political one.” “MacArthur shoots another political bomb [this time?] through Martin, leader of the Republican minority in the House.” When that happened Truman was—in his own mind—no longer one of those “crazy politicians” turning on a general trying to win a war. He could wash Hannibal and Lee out of his mind and think of another historical precedent, that of a great president, even if Abraham Lincoln was a Republican. On 11 April, the day



*The General Hangs at Dawn* (AP photo, Seattle, Washington, 13 Apr 51)

Truman announced the discharge of MacArthur, he told his White House staff that the general, like George B. McClellan in the 1860s, “worked with the minority to undercut the administration when there was a war on.” The next day, the *New York Herald Tribune* summarized the progression of events quite perceptively: “The most obvious fact about the dismissal of General MacArthur is that he virtually forced his own removal.”<sup>30</sup>

## Notes

1. Admiral Robert Dennison, "Oral History," 10 September, 6 October, 2 November 1971, Truman Presidential Library (TPL), 108.
2. Truman described and quoted in David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 141, 969; special counsel to the president Charles S. Murphy quoted in Robert Donovan, *The Presidency of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Norton, 1977-1982) 2:25; *Where the Buck Stops: The Personal and Private Writings of Harry S. Truman*, Margaret Truman, ed. (New York: Warner, 1989), 2.
3. Truman Diary, May 1931 and 14 May 1934, President's Secretary's File, Box 334, TPL.
4. Truman Diary, 17 June 1945, *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman*, Robert E. Ferrell, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 47; "Oral Reminiscences of Governor W. Averell Harriman" (hereafter referred to as "Oral Reminiscences"), 20 June 1977, *D. Clayton James Papers*, MacArthur Memorial Foundation Library (MMFL); Paul H. Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), 39; and Nitze, "Interview given for BBC Documentary, 'Korea,'" ca. November 1986, *Nitze Papers*, Box 130, Library of Congress; Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman* (New York: Doubleday, 1955-1956), 2:443-44.
5. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 138; Truman Diary, 6 April 1951, in *Off the Record*, 210.
6. MacArthur, 18 May 1950, quoted in C.L. Sulzberger, *A Long Row Of Candles* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 562; Sun Li-jen to MacArthur, 18 May 1949, RG 5, OMS Correspondence, "Sun Li-jen," MMFL.
7. MacArthur's press statement reproduced in Courtney Whitney, *MacArthur: His Rendezvous With History* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 373.
8. Truman quoted in Harriman, "Oral Reminiscences," 29 June 1977, 8; Harriman (May 1975), in *The Korean War: A 25 Year Perspective*, Francis Heller, ed. (Lawrence, KS: Regents Press of Kansas, 1977), 25; for double envelopment at Lae, see *Reports of General MacArthur: Vol. 2, Part 1: Japanese Operations in the Southwest Pacific Area* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966), 216; "Extracts of Memorandum of Conversations by Harriman and MacArthur, 6 and 8 August 1950," *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter referred to as *FRUS*] 1950, 6:429.
9. Harriman's memorandum reprinted in Truman, *Memoirs*, 2:349-53, quotation on 352-53; Truman and Bradley quoted in, "Oral Reminiscences," 8-9; Rudy Abramson, *Spanning The Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891-1986* (New York: William Morrow, 1992), 453-54; Johnson quoted by Harriman, 4 February 1954, Princeton University Seminar, Reel 5, Track 2, 7.
10. For favorable UN force ratios before Inchon, the effect of the Air Force since July, and casualty estimates, see Roy Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu*, (Washington, DC: Center of Military History (CMH), 1992), 256, 263, 392, 546-47; MacArthur to General Richard Stephens, Director, CMH, 15 November 1957, RG 10, Box 142; "Oral Reminiscences," 20 June 1977; Truman, *Memoirs*, 2:348, 358; Dean Acheson, *Present At The Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: New American Library, 1970), 579; Acheson quoted in Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 532.
11. General [then Lieutenant General] James H. Polk, 9 December 1971, "Oral History," (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College) 25; "Substance of Statements Made at Wake Island Conference on 15 October 1950," *FRUS*, 1950, 7:953.
12. Dean Rusk, "Oral History," *Rusk Papers*, University of Georgia, 4; John Muccio quoted in Wiltz, "Truman and MacArthur," 173; "Memorandum of Conversation [with Chinese informant], Prepared in Department of State," 2 February 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, 7:1558.
13. Truman's attire described in Harry Vaughn, "Oral History," TPL, 6; "Wake Island," 25 November 1950, *Documentary History of Truman Presidency*, in Dennis Merrill, ed. (Washington, DC: University Publications of America, 1997), 20:57.
14. Truman (1959) in *Talking with Harry: Candid Conversations with President Harry S. Truman*, Ralph Weber, ed. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001), 194; Frank Pace "Oral History," January-June 1972, TPL, 102.
15. Truman, *Memoirs*, 2:355-56, 384.

16. Truman quoted at NSC Meeting, 28 November, *FRUS*, 7:1245; John Hersey, "Profiles: Mr. President," *New Yorker*, (7 April 1951), 1; (14 April 1951), 52; and (5 May 1951), 52. Lest I sound too cynical, I do not mean to minimize Truman's genuine reluctance "to go back on people when luck is against them." His own life in business was a long record of bouncing back from failure and trying once again.
17. *The New York Times*, 2 December 1950, 1, 4; D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970-1985), 3:540; NSC, 1 July 1950, quoted and issue discussed in Shu Guang Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949-1958* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 85-88, Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, 3 December 1950, in *Documentary History of Truman Presidency*, Merrill, ed., 19:149.
18. JCS to major commands, 6 December 1950, in *Ibid.*, 20:58; Department of Army to CINCFE, 8 December 1950, RG 9, Box 9, MMFL.
19. Marshall at United States Senate, 83d Congress, 1st Session, Hearings before the Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committee, *Military Situation in the Far East* (hereafter referred to as *MacArthur Hearings*); 342; MacArthur to Roy Howard, 20 December 1950, RG 5, Box 28, MMFL.
20. Collins and Vandenberg, Memorandum for JCS, "Consultations with General MacArthur," 19 January 1951, RG 218, JCS, Geographical File, 1951-1953, Box 14, National Archives; MacArthur press conferences on 13 and 20 February 1951 in *A Soldier Speaks: Public Papers and Speeches of Douglas MacArthur*, Vorin Whan, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1965), 234-37; CINCFE to Department of the Army, 11 February 1951, RG 61a, Box 5, MMFL.
21. MacArthur's remarks, 6 to 20 March 1950, quoted in Whitney, *MacArthur*, 462; MacArthur quoted in *The New York Times*, 14 February 1951, 3; in James, *Years of MacArthur*, 3:582-83; and in Stanley Weintraub, *MacArthur's War: Korea and the Unmaking of an American Hero* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 312, 318.
22. Major General Frank Lowe to President Truman, 28 February 1951, President's Secretary's Files, Box 245, TPL; James F. Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year* (Washington, DC: CMH, 1972) 187, footnote 27; Whitney, *MacArthur*, 461; MacArthur quoted in *New York Herald Tribune*, 4 April 1951, 1.
23. MacArthur paraphrased by associate Arnold A. Saltzman, "Oral History," 17 May 1996, MMFL; 6-7. For feelings that Washington was conducting a media campaign to discredit him, see MacArthur to Roy Howard, 20 December 1950, RG 5, Box 28, MMFL and Whitney, *MacArthur*, 454; quote from columnist Stewart Alsop, "Korea Is Still the Key," *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 April 1951, 2:5; Omar Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 623.
24. Truman's draft proposal in *Memoirs*, 2:439-40; MacArthur statement of 24 March 1951 reprinted in *MacArthur Hearings*, 3541-42.
25. Truman at Press Conference, 29 March 1951, *Truman Public Papers*, 203; *London Daily Herald* (organ of the Labour government) quoted in *New York Herald Tribune*, 27 March 1951, 7; also see "French Express Alarm," *The New York Times*, 25 March 1951, 4; and "Issue of M'Arthur Is Skirted in U.N.," *The New York Times*, 10 April 1951, 3; for U.S. government response, see *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 March 1951, 1, and 28 March 1951, 4; JCS to CINCFE, 24 March 1951, State Department Records Relating to Korean War, Box 10; Herblock cartoon reprinted in *The New York Times*, 1 April 1951, 4:3.
26. Truman, 28 April 1951, to Elsey and Eben Ayers in "MacArthur" notes of Elsey, *Eben Ayers Papers*, Box 7; Joseph Short to E.J. Williams, 25 July 1952, PSF, Box 298; Bradley, interviewed by Hillman and Heller, 30 March 1955, Post-Presidential Papers, Box 641, all in TPL; Truman, *Memoirs*, 2:442; *Off the Record*, 210-11.
27. Truman, comment at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 15 December 1961, *Merle Miller Papers*, Box 6; TPL; Martin in the *Congressional Record*, 82d Congress, 1st Session, 3380.
28. Martin and MacArthur in *Ibid.*, 3380-81; Truman, *Memoirs*, 2:446.
29. Tubby, "Oral History," 10 February 1970, TPL, 39-40, 129; and statement by Tubby in *The Truman White House: The Administration of the Presidency, 1945-1953*, Francis Heller, ed. (Lawrence, KS: Regents Press of Kansas, 1980) 147-48.
30. Diary, 5 and 6 April 1951, PSF, Box 33; Truman at staff meeting, 11 April 1951, *Eben Ayers Papers*, Box 7, both in TPL; "The Removal of MacArthur," *New York Herald Tribune*, 12 August 1951, 30.